

LOSS OF CONTROL

6/15/09 9:40 AM

\ANF\Proposal\Doomsday Machine\Doomsday Machines

The American Doomsday Machine
U.S. Planning for a Hundred Holocausts

Notes: morning thoughts:

A DM engineered to be triggered by a wide variety of events sought to be deterred is what Herman Kahn described as "Doomsday in a Hurry."

That is all the more true when the device is on a hair-trigger, sensitive to ambiguous signals and possible false alarms. Still more when the set of triggering events is itself ambiguous, where some of them may not be known to adversaries as proscribed, or when there is some lack of credibility as to whether the response is truly automatic or certain.

All of that was true of the SIOP forces in 1961.

But it was worse than that. American decision-makers (or at least, if not the president, some of the commanders to whom Eisenhower had delegated authority to launch nuclear attacks) were under two key misapprehensions. One: they didn't know (nor did any of their successors for twenty years) that they presided over a DM. They didn't know that an American first strike of the sort they had planned and were poised to deliver would or could end most life on earth, including the devastation of the U.S.

If it were known that a particular system was a DM and that its possessors knew that, there would indeed be reason for others to doubt that it was truly automatic, guaranteed to operate under any one set of circumstances, let alone a variety of them. It can't be made entirely credible that a national leadership has wired up a suicide machine (even in these days of suicide bombers—who have not yet included any movement or state leaders).

(On the other hand, if the event in question, to be deterred, involves the certain death of the leaders themselves, there is ample historical experience of leaders more than ready to take their societies, or at least their immediate associates, with them: Masada, Hitler's scorched earth orders, Saddam Hussein's arrangements for nerve gas on Tel Aviv, various Samson Options in Israel, South Africa, and perhaps France, the Soviet Dead Hand system).

Thus, if the machine were indeed truly wired to explode automatically (like the Soviet Dead Hand system, when switched on during a crisis!) *and its opponents didn't know or believe that* (as in the US during that period—or now!) the situation would be even more dangerous than it would be from the mere existence of the DM.

The presidential delegation, which gave a high degree of automaticity of response to intense but ambiguous warning, was made in ignorance of the likelihood or very possibility of nuclear winter. Thus, there was an expectation that a US first-strike would be very devastating to the very vulnerable Soviet forces: as it would have been to those (actually very small) forces within reach of the US, though *not* to the much larger forces threatening Europe. Damage to the US, it was thought, would not only be limited by this first strike; it would in fact be very small, perhaps non-existent. The probability of devastation to Europe—not only from Soviet retaliation but from our own fallout-- does not seem to have been very much in the minds of strategic planners nor of much deterrent effect.

Second, even if President Eisenhower were convinced (from the U-2 and Discoverer) that the Soviets had almost no offensive capability against the US, that doubt in the missile gap was not shared by the Air Force or theater commanders (including SAC). They believed themselves to be in a state of what Wohlstetter called “Delicate Balance of Terror,” where preemption by either side had a high promise of limiting damage to its own society.

Thus the large US offensive forces promised, if they struck first, to protect the US from the damage to be suffered in a Soviet first strike that might itself be motivated by the false but plausible Soviet belief in a crisis that the US was about to strike. It was the “Pallid Giant” problem: mutual and reciprocal fear of surprise attack (as Schelling put it).

As I found at Kunsan in Korea, a combination of intense warning during a crisis, perhaps enhanced by a nuclear or non-nuclear accident (a collision on an airstrip) and a simultaneous outage of communications could have led subordinate commanders to act on their delegated authority to start World War III.

This possibility arises anywhere with dual possession by adversaries of vulnerable forces large enough to limit damage from the other’s attack if they strike first. The two forces need not be large—they can be the size of the forces of India and Pakistan at this moment!—to tempt both sides to consider preemption, in a crisis. (The foreseeable or possible damage from the other’s retaliation is likely to be large enough to discourage “preventive” attack out of the blue, when no crisis or limited war is raising fears of possible imminent attack by the other. Yet not large enough to discourage preemption when the immediate alternative seems likely to be to suffer an imminent enemy first strike.)

In 1960, Eisenhower (knowing the results of his secret reconnaissance, though these were disputed by the aerospace industry and by the Air Force, in its self-interest in its dominant budget role and in enlarging its own forces) did not fear a Soviet surprise attack and was thus inclined to discount tactical warning (as did occur at NORAD when BMEWS was first switched on, and on other occasions involving geese!) as a basis for preemption. Had he believed what General Power claimed to believe in 1961 (1000

Soviet ICBMs at that time), the situation would have been far more dangerous for the world.

As I say, it was more dangerous than Eisenhower believed, both because his lower commanders *did* believe that or something close to it and did possess delegated authority in some circumstances which frequently obtained (outage of communications); and because nuclear winter was a real likelihood, unknown to him and everyone else. So we did have a DM on a hair-trigger. Still worse, the human controllers of our DM were under the false belief that they faced a Soviet force of comparable (or greater!) offensive capability and temptation to preempt. If they had been right, we would have had two DMs on "delicate balance," neither knowing that a DM was possible or existed, each ready to preempt the other.

It seems doubtful that I would be here to write this, nearly fifty years later. Or that computers like this would exist, or any of the other human achievements of the last five thousand years, like cities or civilization.

Later, when a second DM did come into existence (between 1964 and 1968), they both remained on alert for preemption, both remained ignorant of their status as DM-states (nuclear-winter-capable) and serious US first-use threats (as in 1969 and later), but the instability was considerably dampened from what it would have been had both forces had been large and vulnerable in 1961, before widespread deployment of hardened silos and submarine missiles. Still, the false promise of "decapitation" (false in the face of actual, secret, delegation and the Dead Hand) kept the objective of damage-limitation alive, to this day, preserving the risk of preemption.

So, although the dangers for the world in the Sixties and after were not as intense as they would have been if the "missile gap" had actually existed in 1960-62, they remained (and are still) far more dangerous than if either (1) nuclear winter were not a physical possibility, or (2) both sides were fully cognizant of and responsive to the nuclear winter effect. We do now still have two Domsday Machines on hair-trigger (even if not as sensitive as they might be).

Presumably neither side would allow the existence of its own machine, nor tolerate the other, if it fully faced up to the reality of what is at risk, or were capable —emotionally, bureaucratically, politically--of taking the long run and the survival of the species into its active consideration, concern, and appropriate response.

There seems to a species failure here: not so much a cognitive failure (the scientific studies of consequences do now exist!) but a limitation of the ability of this species--organized, as is its wont, into rivalrous groups--to protect its own survival from the consequences of its possession of thermonuclear weapons.

Twice before, before the first test of an atomic device, and again confronting the prospect of thermonuclear weapons, certain highly-placed humans—nuclear scientists—

envisioned the possibility that they might be constructing a Doomsday Machine.
(atmospheric ignition)